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ABSTRACT

Rather than viewing Channel One's World Wide Web site as an authentic news bureau, as the organization claims, it is better understood as an advertising delivery system. The web site is an attempt to expand Channel One's reach into schools, taking advantage of unsuspecting teachers and students who might fall prey to spurious claims. This paper recommends that teachers find alternative, reliable news sources that seek to educate and inform young people, not to market to them. The paper provides a detailed description and analysis of content on Channel One's web site and American Online (AOL) area, including: (1) promotion of Channel One activities and people (such as web schools and contests); (2) information about news topics; and (3) information solicitations from students. It also describes the use of advertising banners, multi-layered marketing, and self-promoting links. Appendices present a sample Channel One survey and a news article on advertising in schools. (EV)

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CHANNEL ONE ONLINE: ADVERTISING NOT EDUCATING

Shelley Pasnik

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CHANNEL ONE ONLINE: ADVERTISING NOT EDUCATING

by Shelley Pasnik*

The Channel One Web site and area on America Online are extensions of the controversial K-III Communications that has forced its way into classrooms. Given that Channel One news boasts that it reaches 40 percent of all middle and high school students in the United States, it is crucial to better understand the nature of its online presence.

Channel One alleges that it is a news bureau whose mission is to inform students and teachers of current events. The Web site and AOL area are brimming with self-aggrandizing claims, such as the notion that Channel One is "one of the premier providers of educational video," and that "the Hacienda (where the news anchors are based) is the nerve center of one of only five television news organizations that cover both the nation and the world." But there is precious little to be found on the Web and AOL's proprietary service to substantiate Channel One's status as an educational content provider. Instead, Channel One's forays into new media are much like their off-line efforts: an over-abundance of self-promotion, a fair amount of advertising and a modicum of content.

Not only does Channel One use its Web site and AOL area to advance its own standing and popularity within schools, it uses them to gather an inordinate amount of personal information from students in the process. Nearly half of all pages on the Channel One site are dedicated to collecting information from students and/or promoting Channel One. Information is solicited from students without disclosing how the information will be used and who will have access to it. There also is no attempt on the part of K-III Communications to obtain parental permission even when personally identifiable information is solicited from children as young as ten years old.[1]

Rather than viewing Channel One as an authentic news bureau, it is better understood as an advertising delivery system. Channel One's Web site is an attempt to expand its reach into schools, taking advantage of unsuspecting teachers and students who might fall prey to its spurious claims. One of the most exciting and appealing aspects of the Web and other interactive services is that they give many people the opportunity to become producers. Compared to other media, there are relatively few barriers preventing individuals, organizations and companies from placing their creations on

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* Shelley Pasnik is the Director of Children's Policy at the Center for Media Education (CME). She co-authored the report, *Web of Deception: Threats to Children from Online Marketing*, documenting how advertisers and marketers have begun targeting the rapidly growing numbers of children and teenagers online. The report is part of CME's initiative to ensure that the power of the new media system will be harnessed a positive force in the lives of children.

[1] See Appendix 1 for a sample survey.

the Web for others to see and read.[2] While this relative ease offers new opportunities to anyone who wants to be a publisher, it also can be problematic for everyone else who is a potential consumer of the published information. Companies such as Channel One can make unsubstantiated claims to legitimacy as a news outlet without any threat of repercussions. This report suggests that, at the very least, students and teachers targeted by K-III Communications need to be suspicious of its lack of forthrightness. A more effective approach, however, is for teachers not to rely on the Channel One Web site to supply their students with news information. Channel One's primary purpose is to expose students to an endless stream of promotions. Instead, teachers should find alternative, reliable news sources that seek to educate and inform young people, not to market to them.

What follows is a detailed analysis of Channel One's Web site and AOL area.

WORLD WIDE WEB

channelone.com

USE OF ADVERTISING BANNERS

Upon typing "http://www.channelone.com" in December of 1996, a student was greeted by an advertisement for Nintendo 64 -- one of the hottest-selling items last Christmas. This ad banner for the video game company was in direct violation of one of five core principles recommended by the Center for Media Education concerning online advertising: Content areas for young people should not be directly linked to advertising sites.[3]

[2]This is not to ignore the complexities involved in trying to achieve universal service for all schools and libraries. CME is working with the Education and Library Network Coalition to encourage the Federal Communications Commission to adopt policies that will give all students, regardless of income and geography, access to advanced telecommunications services.

[3]The five principles concerning online advertising to young people recommended by CME are as follows: 1) personally identifiable information should not be collected from persons under 16 without parental consent and full and effective disclosure; 2) advertising and promotions targeted at young people should be clearly labeled and separated from content; 3) content areas for young people should not be directly linked to advertising sites; 4) there should be no direct interaction between young people and product spokescharacters; and 5) there should be no online microtargeting of young people, and no direct-response marketing.

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When students clicked on the banner, they were immediately taken to the Nintendo site (http://www.nintendo.com/). Although the banner was located in the upper, left-hand side of the home page, it did not disappear when a student followed one of the other links within the site. The Channel One site is designed for a browser using frames, which means that certain "core" information, including the Nintendo advertisement, remained on-screen the entire time a student visited the Channel One Web site during the holiday season.

In addition to Nintendo, Channel One has used advertising banners to link to other companies trying to sell to young people. One of the more controversial ad banners was for the Mountain Dew Web site called "The Extreme Network." Last summer when Channel One was displaying "The Extreme Network" ad banner, Mountain Dew had launched a campaign to distribute beepers to students to promote youth-oriented products. Despite the claim made by Mountain Dew that it would not beep children during school hours, the company's promotion of its beeper scheme on the Channel One Web site left many in the child advocacy and educational communities unconvinced.

Wanting to go beyond traditional forms of advertising, Mountain Dew mounted a sophisticated operation of state-of-the-art technologies -- including Web sites and beepers -- to target young people. Mountain Dew (owned by PepsiCo Inc.) promised to beep students at least once a week, urging them to call a toll-free number immediately. They were then treated to a commercial message by at least one of twenty-four different companies who had agreed to offer weekly specials in collaboration with Mountain Dew.

Mountain Dew had created inescapable advertising that preyed upon young people's desire for immediate gratification, nurturing impulse behavior and inhibiting thoughtful responses. Channel One was complicit in the unorthodox promotion, giving Mountain Dew access to students attending Channel One's Web Schools.[4]

MULTI-LAYERED MARKETING

There is relatively little content on the Channel One Web site. Once a student gets past what appears to be a significant number of links on the home page, it becomes clear that the site is used primarily by Channel One as a promotional vehicle. Although self-referring links are common to the Web, the number of unique pages on channelone.com is quite small. This paucity of information calls into question Channel One's claim that it is a useful tool for students and teachers.

The content on the Channel One Web site can be grouped into three general categories:

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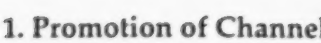
[4]See Appendix 2.

1. Promotion of Channel One activities and people



Meet the Channel One News Anchors: a personality hit parade offering such information as who the anchors' prom dates were and each one's "geekiest high school moment." Once students wade through this banal information, they are treated to a description of how each anchor came to work for Channel One. These mock biographies are used to plug Channel One without having to demonstrate its actual merits.

Web Schools: self-described as "a launching point to hundreds of high schools, junior highs, middle schools and elementary schools that have Internet sites on the Web." By encouraging schools to sing the praises of Channel One, the company does not appear to be shamelessly promoting itself. Instead, Channel One can lead school officials to believe that it is a reputable provider of worthwhile content. This is a rather ingenious marketing approach on the part of K-III Communications as Channel One seems to have received endorsements from all of its "Web Schools." Furthermore, by creating this virtual community, Channel One can avoid issues, such as why there are no schools listed when a visitor clicks on New York. Recognizing that Channel One holds little educational value, New York has banned Channel One from its schools. Despite its so-called status as a news bureau, Channel One never discloses this.

Channel One Champions: highlights athletics teams, clubs, campus newspapers, debate teams and other school stars. Similar to "Web Schools," Channel One Champions lends the company credibility. By aligning itself with successful students, Channel One can create the illusion that it, too, is accomplished.

Contests: competitions goading students to become involved with Channel One events such as "Student-Produced Week." Because these contests serve as a recruitment mechanism, encouraging students to participate in the creation of online and broadcast programming, the contests help to insulate Channel One from potential criticism. Channel One can undermine the "us vs. them" distinction between itself and schools and defend the quality of its programming by claiming that students are partially responsible for it.

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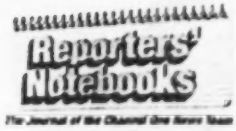
2. Information about news topics

News Areas: a listing of eight to ten special edition articles and news features. Although the articles cover a range of topics they tend to be about natural history, science and social history. Given that the news area should be the richest, eight to ten stories is a meager offering. Although roughly 50% of the news stories contain links to either companion pieces or related sites, lists of links are abundant on the Web and cannot be interpreted as original content.



Reporter's Notebooks: journal entries kept by Channel One news anchors while investigating topics. This area serves the same promotional function as "Meet the Channel One News Anchors."

3. Information solicitations from students

Many efforts are made to keep students at the Channel One Web site. For example, whenever a student does follow a link -- to an advertiser, a Channel One Web school or to a site related to a news story -- a new browser screen appears on top of the one displaying Channel One. This tactic requires students to return to the Channel One site, increasing the likelihood that they will respond to the many questions posed by Channel One. Polls, quizzes and other interactive comment areas that encourage students to share information about themselves are all techniques intended to keep young visitors interested in Channel One. Young people are extremely eager to talk about themselves -- they are far more inclined to complete online registrations than adults are -- nd advertisers and self-marketers like Channel One are learning how to exploit this eagerness. Channel One solicits a great deal of information -- both personal and demographic -- from young people. On no page on the Channel One site is there adequate disclosure. Full and effective disclosure requires a site to state 1) how much information is being collected, including navigational clickstream data; 2) how it will be used; and 3) who will have access to it. Young people's demographic and behavioral information as well as their personal preferences are extremely valuable and can command a high re-sale price among list brokers dealing in personal data.

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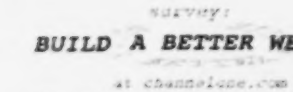
On the Channel One site, requests for information take several forms:



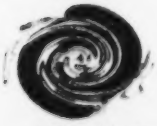
Build a Better Web site: students are asked a number of questions about the Channel One site and changes that can be made to improve it. In the online world, this practice is considered amateurish and is characteristic of a developing site.

Online Poll: students are asked questions on topics that change from week to week. Some of the most recent polls have covered Internet censorship and the use of live animals in scientific research. While it is essential for young people to learn how to formulate opinions and express their ideas, it is equally important for them to understand that these ideas and their privacy have value. Because Channel One does not disclose why questions are being asked, young visitors are denied the opportunity to evaluate whether or not they should respond.

Your Views: a presentation of the responses to previous polls that Channel One has received from students. Students may assume that their responses will be respected and not shared with others to whom they have not given their express permission, when in fact Channel One may be distributing or even selling the results of their polls. Without full and effective disclosure, it is not clear.

Student Union: channelone.com's student newspaper, which is divided into several sections: Features (primarily culled from the "Your Views" section), Fiction & Poetry, Channel One Champions, Contests and Resources (a listing of toll-free help lines for such organizations as the National Mental Health Association and the American Anorexia & Bulimia Association).

Suggest a Quote: allows students to submit a quote to appear on the opening screen on the site. Quotes change daily.



Playlist: asks students to vote for their favorite song. In addition to demographic information such as name, address, and age, Web advertisers often ask young people about their personal tastes, habits and preferences. Armed with both kinds of information, advertisers are able to tailor their promotions to individuals, a practice known as microtargeting or one-to-one marketing. When advertisers are able to craft

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a message to a particular young person, they are able to establish a relationship with him or her. This greatly increases the likelihood that the young person will feel a sense of loyalty to the company and will want to purchase its products.

Pop Quiz: asks students to answer an esoteric question, such as "What number is written as 1 followed by 100 zeroes?"

Feedback: invites students to send e-mail to Channel One for a variety of reasons from problems connecting to the network to personal messages for the news anchors.

AMERICA ONLINE

Keyword: Channel One

Much of Channel One's area on AOL is similar to its Web site:

- **Meet the Channel One News Anchors:** biographical files on each of the eight anchors.
- **Pop Quiz:** daily question and archives of questions asked.
- **Quote of the Day:** daily quote and archives of previous quotes.
- **Your Stuff on Channel One:** information for students about having their fiction, expository writing and artwork used by Channel One online and television programming.

The major distinction between Channel One's Web site and its AOL area is the amount of personal communication between students and Channel One representatives:

- **Message Boards:** similar to the "Your Views" section on the Web site, this area encourages student to post their thoughts and feelings on a number of topics.
- **Chat:** conversations among students in real time.

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Build a Better Website

Channel One Online needs your help in building a better Website at http://channelone.com. Here are some questions that ask how you access channelone.com and your favorite reasons for going on the Internet. This survey should take no more than five minutes. Please click off answers in both the "At HOME" and "At SCHOOL" columns. If a question doesn't apply, just leave it blank. Thank you!

What's your age?

○ 10 or less ○ 11 ○ 12 ○ 13 ○ 14 ○ 15 ○ 16 ○ 17 ○ 18 ○ 19 or older

Are you male or female?

○ Male ○ Female

Are you a student or an educator?

○ Student ○ Educator ○ Other

What's the main reason you visit Channel One Online?

○ To get more of the stories you see on Channel One News.
○ To learn more about the Channel One News anchor-reporters.
○ To take the Poll and Pop Quiz.
○ To check our Playlist--the weekly survey of students' favorite songs.
○ To visit the Student Union--the national online newspaper for high school students.
○ Other

Appendix 1

How fast is your Internet (modem) connection?	
At HOME: 9600 bps or less 14.4 kbps 28.8 kbps ISDN T-1 or higher Don't know	At SCHOOL: 9600 bps or less 14.4 kbps 28.8 kbps ISDN T-1 or higher Don't know

What's your primary method of connection to the Internet?	
At HOME: Independent Service Provider such as Netcom or Earthlink America Online Prodigy Compuserve Microsoft Network Don't know	At SCHOOL: Independent Service Provider such as Netcom or Earthlink America Online Prodigy Compuserve Microsoft Network Don't know

What time of day do you most typically go online?	
At HOME: 6 a.m. to Noon Noon to 6 p.m. 6 p.m. to Midnight Midnight to 6 a.m.	At SCHOOL: 6 a.m. to Noon Noon to 6 p.m. 6 p.m. to Midnight

How many hours a day do you usually spend online?	
At HOME: One hour or less One to two hours Three to five hours More than five hours	At SCHOOL: One hour or less One to two hours Three to five hours More than five hours

What type of computer system do you use to go online?	
At HOME: Macintosh Windows 3.1 or 3.0 Windows 95 or NT UNIX Other	At SCHOOL: Macintosh Windows 3.1 or 3.0 Windows 95 or NT UNIX Other

What browser do you use to surf the World Wide Web?	
At HOME: Netscape 2.0 Netscape 3.0 Microsoft Internet Explorer 2.0 Microsoft Internet Explorer 3.0 Mosaic Text-only browser The browser built into your commercial service, such as AOL or Prodigy Other	At SCHOOL: Netscape 2.0 Netscape 3.0 Microsoft Internet Explorer 2.0 Microsoft Internet Explorer 3.0 Mosaic Text-only browser The browser built into your commercial service, such as AOL or Prodigy Other

What's the number one reason you go online?

At HOME:	At SCHOOL:
Research/help with schoolwork	Research/help with schoolwork
Get news	Get news
Communicate with others via e-mail, chat or message boards	Communicate with others via e-mail, chat or message boards
Download software	Download software
Play games	Play games
Other entertainment purposes	Other entertainment purposes

How often do you visit Channel One Online's Website at http://channelone.com?

At HOME:	At SCHOOL:
More than once a day	More than once a day
Once a day	Once a day
2 or 3 times a week	2 or 3 times a week
Once a week	Once a week
Twice a month	Twice a month
Once a month	Once a month
Rarely or never	Rarely or never

How often do you visit the Channel One Online site on America Online?

At HOME:	At SCHOOL:
More than once a day	More than once a day
Once a day	Once a day
2 or 3 times a week	2 or 3 times a week
Once a week	Once a week
Twice a month	Twice a month
Once a month	Once a month
Rarely or never	Rarely or never

THE MEDIA BUSINESS

Advertising | David Barboza

Mountain Dew's promotion angers children's advocates.

A PROMOTION for Mountain Dew that offers young people discounted pagers with advertising messages has angered children's advocates who see it as a new form of manipulation.

But Mountain Dew, best known for its edgy, irreverent advertising campaigns, is trumpeting the promotion as an innovative approach to marketing that links interactive technology to Generation X culture.

The promotion works like this: A consumer mails in 10 Mountain Dew proofs of purchase along with $29.99 plus shipping, and gets a beeper with six months of free air time.

Beginning on the Fourth of July weekend with live programming from the MTV cable network's Beach House, thousands of teenagers and young adults will be paged weekly by Mountain Dew, which is owned by **Pepsico Inc.**, and given the opportunity to call a toll-free number and hear about a chance to win up to $50 million in discounts and prizes, like a Hummer vehicle or a trip to the ESPN Sports Center.

Already, more than 50,000 youths have registered to join the "Mountain Dew Extreme Network," referring to the soft drink's support of "extreme sports" like bungee-jumping or sky-surfing. Mountain Dew says it is well on the way to a goal of enlisting 500,000 participants in a six-month promotion that will offer discounts and prizes from partners like Frito-Lay, Sony Music and Universal Studios.

More than 50,000 youths have registered for the "Mountain Dew Extreme Network," which supports in-line skating and other sports.

Children's advocates and advertising critics, however, are mounting protests against the promotions.

"Technology is unleashing new creativity on the part of marketers who will stop at nothing to reach children," said Kathryn Montgomery, president of the Center for Media Education in Washington, a watchdog group that focuses on children. "You may as well just wire them up to the advertiser so they can get a stream of ads."

Mountain Dew, though, is very happy about what it views as a revolutionary way to track and measure consumer habits. "This is the ultimate in one-on-one marketing," said Jon Harris, a spokesman for Pepsi in Somers, N.Y. "No one has used this technology before. It's definitely a breakthrough."

Indeed, Mountain Dew — which

Appendix 2

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has used spots about sky-surfing and bungee-jumping to appeal to consumers ages 12 to 24 — contends the campaign fits its subversive brand personality.

"We need to communicate with them in a way that fits their life style," said Janine Bousquette, vice president for marketing at Pepsi. "Beepers are the mainstream communications tool of the 90's. It seemed like the perfect fit."

While Mountain Dew is spending millions on print and television spots, created by the BBDO New York unit of the Omnicom Group, most participants in the "Mountain Dew Extreme Network" are sports and recreational outfitters, like Footaction, Burton Snowboards, Killer Loop sunglasses and K-2 In-Line Skates.

To enlist more youths, Mountain Dew is using everything from promotional packaging to ads in Spin magazine to commercials on MTV, urging youths to, "Do the Dew ... Get the Beeper ... Join the Network."

There is also a World Wide Web site created by another Omnicom unit, the DDB Interactive division of DDB Needham Dallas.

David Burwick, marketing director for Mountain Dew, attributed the beeper idea to the TL Partnership in Dallas, an Omnicom unit that has done promotional work for Pepsico. Focus groups and quantitative testing confirmed the promotion's effectiveness in reaching the elusive youth market, he added.

Which is exactly what critics fear. "This is interactive child manipulation with access to reach the child wherever the child is," said Peggy Charren, founder of Action for Children's Television, an advocacy group. "It's really sort of horrifying."

Others, like Ms. Montgomery, say that soliciting information from youths through the Internet and pagers also raises privacy questions.

"We are calling for some rules about how you market to kids in the on-line world," she said. "I don't think parents realize what's happening. It's an example of how the promise of cyberspace is being eclipsed by other interactive devices."

But Mountain Dew argues that its program is misunderstood. Mr. Burwick says youthful consumers are being instructed on "proper beeper etiquette," and that no one will be paged during school hours.

Mountain Dew also says that research indicates that parents support the program because they can stay in touch with their children.

"We're not using the beepers as an intrusive device to advertise to consumers," Mr. Burwick said. "We're allowing them to enter a world with a brand that fits their life style."

Others, like Ms. Montgomery, say that soliciting information from youths through the Internet and pagers also raises privacy questions. They also note that beepers are used by drug dealers.

And Ms. Charren is gloomy about the future of interactive advertising. "Pretty soon," she said, "Milky Way bars are going to talk to you and say, 'Eat me.'"

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